

# Racing in the river of dreams

Martin Dreyer coaching cattle herders to compete in the Dusi, writes Susan Comrie

**W**ORD travels fast by bush telegraph. And in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, news that Cape Town's paddling legend Martin Dreyer was scouting for undiscovered paddlers travelled like wildfire. Dreyer camped out in one of the most rural parts of KwaZulu-Natal late last year, training a group of amateur paddlers made up of high-school boys and cattle herders.

Their dream is to take on South Africa's toughest paddling race, the Dusi Canoe Marathon – which starts in Pietermaritzburg on Thursday – and for weeks Dreyer, South Africa's seven-times Dusi champion, has grilled them, making them carry their old, leaking canoes on hour-long runs through the valley before training on the river.

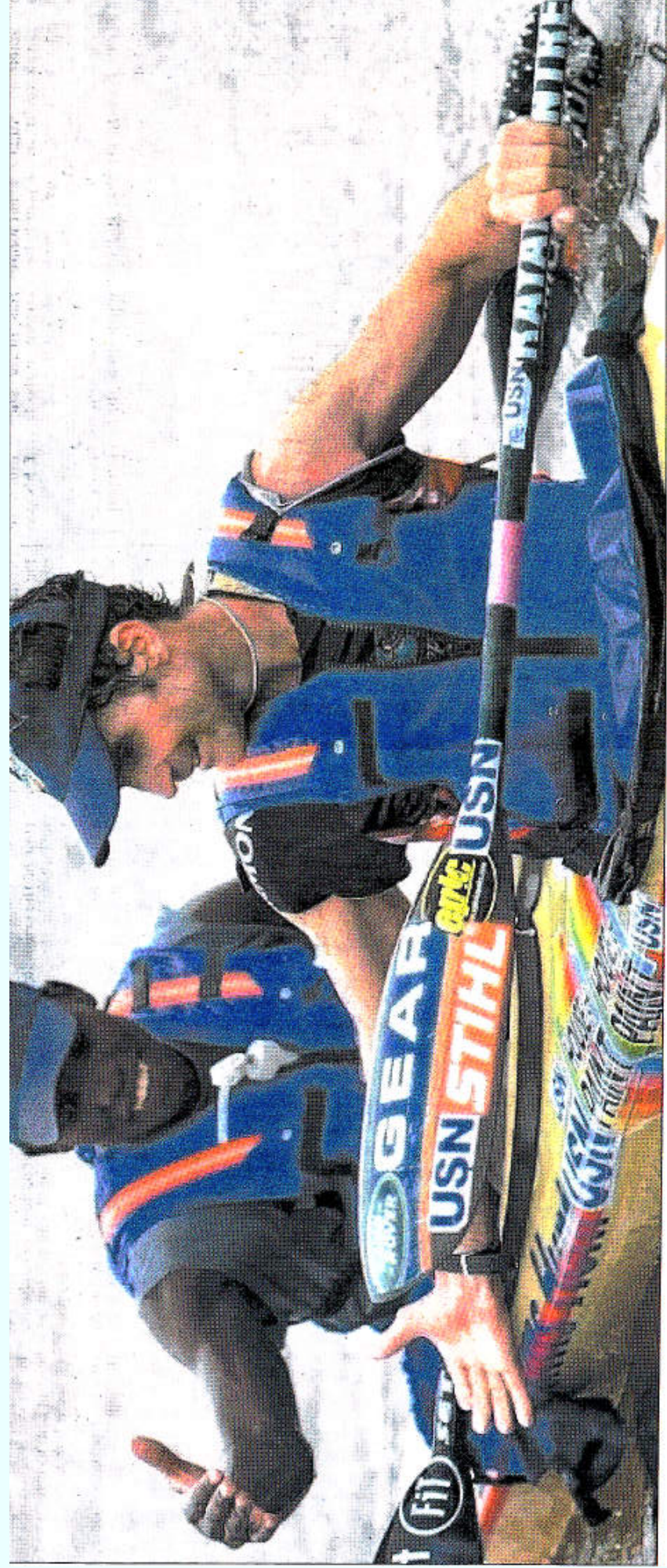
## Barefoot

Most of Dreyer's team ran barefoot and have to borrow what little equipment they have but, according to him, if the Dusi was won on passion alone, his team of unlikely stars would be champions already.

"These guys have been watching us whites – us mlungus – paddling past their huts, in their backyard, for years but have never had any means of participating in the race," Dreyer says.

"The whole community is buzzing about this, and I'm excited to see how good they can be.

"I'm actually more excited about doing this than doing the Dusi."



**PADDLE POWER:** Martin Dreyer (right) and Michael Mbanjwa won last year's Dusi marathon and made history – in a new South African way – in the process

**Picture: INDEPENDENT ARCHIVES**

For a sporting legend who has some of the world's biggest titles under his belt, including the Land Rover G4 Challenge and the Bull of Africa, that's a strong statement to make.

Last year Dreyer, 39, helped to make history when he paddled to victory with teammate Michael Mbanjwa – the first black winner in the Dusi's history.

Although this gave Dreyer a record seventh win in the Dusi, it was the experience of training with Mbanjwa near his home in the Valley of the Thousand Hills that made it the best Dusi of his life.

Having seen potential in some of Mbanjwa's friends, Dreyer decided to return to the Valley, this time as a coach.

Beginning with not much

more than a training schedule and a rooftop tent donated by Howling Moon, he put his own sporting career on hold and headed for KwaZulu-Natal.

His plan – to take at least 10 young paddlers down South Africa's toughest river race after just three months of training – is ambitious, but his enthusiasm is even more infectious.

Johannesburg company Computer Share agreed to back the project through its "change a life" trust, and gave paddlers their first look at their new K1 canoes, paddles, lifejackets, splashguards and other kit in late November.

Other companies have chipped in to make sure the project is a success.

Each paddler has received three pairs of shoes and they are also being rewarded for their hard work with protein bars and specially formulated meal-replacement milkshakes.

Despite this project's humble beginnings, Dreyer wants to expand his hands-on, grassroots approach into a Martin Dreyer Academy to help unearth sporting talent in South Africa's most under-privileged

neighbourhoods. He already has plans to introduce his team to mountain biking next year and has his sights set on the Triple Challenge – a 22km train run, 52km mountain bike and 22km paddle in Pietermaritzburg.

For some of the team, though, who trained in between studying for their matric exams, paddling the Dusi won't

distract them from the reality of living in an area where the prospects of a high-school graduate finding a job are almost zero.

Dreyer believes, though, that the dedication his team is showing will not only make them fierce athletes, but will teach them valuable life skills.

"It's going to be life-changing for these guys," he says.

"They are taking on an enormous challenge and they will need a lot of self-belief, hard work and discipline.

"And that sense of accomplishment and the confidence that being part of the Dusi will give them, will definitely help them going forward."

## Bitter-sweet

For Dreyer, taking on this challenge is a little bitter-sweet.

If this team of unlikely stars is successful, he wants to take them on full-time, which means he will have to give up his own sporting career.

But at the moment, the thrill of finding out just how good they can be, tops the thrill of competing.

His team has competed in a few warm-up races where, out of as many as 800 experienced paddlers, several of his team placed in the top 10.

"A white oke has great opportunities in the Dusi – he has vehicles and friends to drive them and people helping him along the way – and I want to make sure that these guys have as much help as anyone else in the race," Dreyer says.

"That's when you'll see just how good they are."

